

First Base Offers New Opportunity For Hodges

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Monday, April 19 2010 8:00 PM - Last Updated Monday, April 19 2010 9:27 PM



The beginning of a new season brings new opportunity.

For players who had good years the previous season, it presents them with the opportunity to add to the success with another successful season. But for those that maybe struggled with their performance or with injuries, the turn of the page on the calendar to a new season is always welcomed as an opportunity to get back to performing at their best again. For Wes Hodges that is exactly the case.

It is no secret that Hodges had a tough year last season at the plate where in 91 games – mostly with Triple-A Columbus – he hit just .269 with 5 HR, 40 RBI and a .704 OPS, which paled in comparison with his near-MVP season at Double-A Akron the previous season where in 133 games he hit .290 with 18 HR, 97 RBI and an .820 OPS.

But a lot of his struggles from last season were the result of a wrist and bicep injury which forced him to miss almost 50 games over the first three months of the season and when he returned still plagued him the rest of the season.

Hodges is now 100% healthy and certainly looks like it as not only is he off to a solid start at the plate this season hitting .323 with 1 HR, 5 RBI and a .981 OPS in eight games, but he just looks healthy and stronger.

"It is exciting to get the season going," said Hodges in a recent interview last weekend at

First Base Offers New Opportunity For Hodges

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Monday, April 19 2010 8:00 PM - Last Updated Monday, April 19 2010 9:27 PM

Huntington Park in Columbus. "It feels good. It is a long season and I am going to have down times and times I am doing well. I really don't try to get too high or too low. Last year I started off the first game and I think I was 0-for-5 with three strikeouts, so [it's definitely better right now]."

Hodges spent the offseason getting himself in good physical condition, and came into his second big league spring training camp with the mindset to get things right with his hitting and make some of the improvements defensively at third base he was unable to work on last year because of his injuries. But those plans changed rather quickly when he arrived at spring training when the Indians informed him that they were going to try him out at first base.

The initial plan was that he would split his playing time 50-50 between first and third base, but after he played a few games at first in the spring the Indians liked what they saw and decided to just make a full time move to first base.

"I don't know [what prompted the move]," said Hodges. "Going into camp they told me I was going to play there 50-50, then after I had a good game there they told me that they just want me to concentrate on first with [Matt] LaPorta being injured and [Russell] Branyan being injured as well."

By moving Hodges to first base, the Indians are attempting to fill a position of weakness at the moment in the organization. This past offseason when they looked at the internal options at first base they only had Andy Marte, Matt LaPorta and Jordan Brown. With two guys who are essentially rookies in LaPorta and Brown, Marte who is a third baseman by trade and not really considered an everyday option in a big league lineup, the inexperience at the position, and also with LaPorta still coming back from toe and hip surgery as well as Brown's injury history and less than favorable reviews about his defense at first base, the Indians needed more options for the big league team at the position. This is one of the main reasons they went hunting for an option to play first base in the free agent market last offseason, and why they eventually signed Branyan.

Branyan of course is not a long term fit, and while LaPorta is considered the first baseman of the future the only first base prospect in the system considered to have the potential to be an everyday player at first base is Beau Mills. However, Mills had a down season last year at Double-A Akron where he hit .267 with 14 HR, 83 RBI and a .724 OPS in 134 games and really won't be an option until maybe sometime during the 2011 season if things go right. Beyond Mills there really is nothing else in the system anywhere close to sniffing the big leagues in the next few years at first base at least as a potential everyday option.

Plus, you can't forget that uber third base prospect Lonnie Chisenhall is on the big league horizon. He impressed in his first big league camp this spring, and he is currently at Double-A Akron and hitting .313 with 0 HR, 3 RBI and an .812 OPS in eight games. Depending on who you talk to, Chisenhall is widely considered the best or second best third base prospect in the minors, and it looks like the position is his in Cleveland by sometime in 2011 if he continues to develop and perform.

So, with all that in mind, the Indians needed to find an alternative position for Hodges in the

First Base Offers New Opportunity For Hodges

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Monday, April 19 2010 8:00 PM - Last Updated Monday, April 19 2010 9:27 PM

event Chisenhall does prove his worth and takes the third base position in the near future. Hodges also helps provide depth at a position of need at first base and still could end up an option at third base if Chisenhall falters. Hodges may even be the stop gap option at third base this year if current third baseman Jhonny Peralta is traded. Considering that Hodges is not considered much of a glove man at third base, this provides the flexibility to use his bat more effectively by plugging him into the lineup where needed at third base, first base or designated hitter.

All rationale aside, Hodges must now go through the adjustment process of learning the new position. Now that he is playing first base full time he is getting a crash course at the position, which is an entirely different way of playing than what he was accustomed to at third base.

"I am still learning where to be with situations that come up that I haven't really practiced yet," said Hodges. "I guess the biggest thing is trying not to play the position like third base, because at third you have to be really quick and make quick decisions, where at first you have a little bit more time. So I am just trying to be patient and not rush anything."

Since Hodges has really only been playing the position for six weeks, he is still picking up all the little things like lining up on throws from the outfield, pickoffs, picks on balls in the dirt, and so on. With that in mind there is no way that everything can be taught in such a short amount of time as new things will come up from time to time in games that he hasn't been taught yet and that really can't be taught until he is put such a situation in a game. Right now he finds himself thinking a lot out there rather than just reacting, but in time things should come more natural to him.

"[The hardest thing] is just thinking ahead where to go," said Hodges. "At third I just reacted, but now I have to think 'okay when the ball is hit where do I have to go'. Just stuff like that. It's more about positioning."

In addition to making the position switch, Hodges is also adjusting to some changes outside of the game as he got married last November to his wife Katie. Unlike prior seasons, she is living with him in Columbus and he enjoys having her there though it is still an adjustment process early in the season since he spent the last three seasons waking up alone in his hotel room or apartment during baseball season.

"It's really good," said Hodges about how things are going since the wedding. "It's been an adjustment, especially right now because she is with me this year so I wake up and there is someone with me whereas in the past I was home alone. It's been great and I am glad to have this opportunity to have her here."

Whether it be a big league opportunity, the opportunity to have his wife and family closer to him, or just the opportunity to make amends for his struggles last year, such is the excitement that the opportunity of a new season provides.

Follow Tony and the Indians Prospect Insider on Twitter [@tlastoria](#). His new book the [2010 Cleveland Indians Top 100 Prospects & More](#)

First Base Offers New Opportunity For Hodges

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Monday, April 19 2010 8:00 PM - Last Updated Monday, April 19 2010 9:27 PM

is also available for purchase on

[Amazon.com](#)

or

[his site](#)

.